

# Castlemaine Naturalist

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Monthly newsletter of the  
Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club Inc.



Eurasian Hoopoe

Photo Nigel Harland

## **A Twitcher's Tale**

Nigel Harland

I became a "twitcher" a number of years ago. For those of you who are unsure of what a twitcher is, I will explain. It is a birdwatcher who hears that a particular rarity has been seen, books flights immediately and sets off in search of the objective, which is a sighting of the rarity. The term apparently arose in England a number of years ago when two avid birdwatchers would get on their motorbike and travel some distance to see some migrant from the Arctic or Americas. Needless to say, a motorbike would be pretty useless in Australia!

In early December a rarity was found near Broome. A friend of mine, who lives in Deniliquin phoned to see if I intended to go and twitch it. I said no – Broome is further away than anywhere else in Australia and the airfare is not cheap. He phoned again the next day and I said no again, although not quite so emphatically. He phoned the next day and I said yes – just like he knew I would! We booked flights the next day and flew to Broome via Perth. It is not a quick flight and we arrived just as the sun set – too late for a preliminary search.

I had better tell you that our target was a Eurasian Hoopoe, a bird which mainly inhabits the Northern hemisphere. It is a wanderer and can be found in the south of England. When I lived there, I was told that if I wanted to see one I should look on vicars' lawns in the summer time. Apocryphal though this story is, it does have some truth in that the Hoopoe likes to search for hidden beetles in green lawns. It is what might be called a "crippler" in Australia – that is twitcherese for a bird that has never been seen in this country and is highly attractive.

Back in Broome we booked into the Roebuck Hotel and found another couple who had been there for three days. Coincidentally they have a block of land at Maldon. They had not seriously twitched before, but they had immediate success, seeing the bird on their first day. The problem was they had not seen the bird at any time during the next two days. Depression set in and we decided we would still go and look for it, but would enjoy seeing other birds that we would not normally see.

We left at 5:30 the next morning and drove the 30km to the known site. No doubt you imagine some exotic, tropical location, but no – it was a petrol station with a caravan park on the side. Enquiries revealed that when the bird had been seen, it was on a strip of watered grass between the caravan park and the road – yes, a lawn, perhaps not belonging to a vicar, but a lawn none the less!! We found a shady spot to sit and wait. We waited and waited and waited, perhaps 5 hours until I decided to wander around the caravan park and the service station. Found some birds I had not seen for a long time, but no Hoopoe. Next thing I saw was a human being running towards me indicating in no uncertain terms that I should follow her back to where I had been sitting. There, less than 20m away was the most “crippling” bird I have ever seen – a Eurasian Hoopoe!!

By the time it had arrived there were about 10 other people there – most had arrived in the last 10 minutes and wondered what all the excitement was about. The bird stayed for a while before crossing the road and



heading into the bush. We went back into Broome and had a celebratory lunch before heading back to the service station. The bird obligingly returned and posed for a few photos on the lawn. It was still there the following morning before we had to head back to the airport for the long flight home.

If I had agreed to go two days earlier, we would have missed the sighting and flown home disappointed – such is the nature of twitching. If I have tempted anyone enough to make the trip, the last I heard was that the Hoopoe was still there – there aren't many green lawns in the vicinity!

## **New Year Greetings from the President**

Dear Castlemaine Field Naturalists

With Christmas and New Year over, we look forward to a pleasant season of observing our lovely plants, birds and other wonders of nature that our members seem to find out in the field.

All the best for 2012

Denis Hurley

### **Bells Swamp, 11/12/2011**

Rita Mills

For our last field trip of the year the day was, according to my notebook, fine, overcast, warm (26°C), some breeze. There were quite a lot of birds around the swamp, and the Black-tailed Native Hens were still there in force. At one stage, for some unknown reason, they streamed out across the paddock, (my guestimate was about 90 of them), with others joining them from behind a point of land, when just as suddenly they all turned and ran back to the mud and shallows where they had been feeding.

We spent quite a while on the east end of the swamp, watching the Red-kneed Dotterels giving the Black-fronted a bit of hurry-up if they approached too closely to what they considered their feeding area, and the Hardheads and Teal out on the water, and trying to decide if there were any Hoary-headed Grebes among the Little Grebes.

Meanwhile a family arrived in two vehicles with young children and canoes, and I thought our birdwatching was over, but, despite upending into the swamp to start with, they just enjoyed paddling around, while Mum came over, very interested in what we were doing, and asked us about a bird that she had seen recently. Out came the bird books, and we decided it was most likely a Nankeen Night Heron. Later she



Hoary-headed Grebes, Bells Swamp - Noel Young 11 Dec 2011

excitedly returned, telling us she'd seen the bird again, and that we were right. It is experiences like these that really make a day doubly pleasurable. We also saw the Heron ourselves later on.

This all happened on the still closed road to the right of the swamp, and it was here the Baillons Crake was seen again, as well as lots of very noisy little birds flitting among the flowering Lignum. Because it was not where, or how, we would expect to find Grass-birds, we dismissed that idea at first, but finally had to agree, after some good views of one or two, that despite the numbers, and the Lignum, they really were Little Grass-birds.

Some of us wandered down the road to the far end of the swamp, keeping a good eye on the traffic, and it amazed me how people could just whizz through there and not even bother to look, but one fellow stopped, and commented that it was "just magic", so I've decided that there's hope for the world yet!

Our list of birds for the afternoon came to 34; still no Sacred Kingfisher, but I found it when I returned with Doug and the grandchildren just before the New Year. Their delight in seeing it, and the Red-kneed Dotterels through binoculars really made my day.

**Birds seen 11/12/11:**

Hardhead, Magpie-lark, Willie Wagtail, Masked Lapwing, Red-kneed Dotterel, Black-tailed Native Hen, Welcome Swallow, Black-fronted Dotterel, Coot (with chicks), Galahs, Sparrow, Little Australasian Grebe, Pacific Black Duck, Wood Duck, White-plumed Honeyeater, Dusky Moorhen (with chicks), Magpie, Red-rumped Parrot, Yellow-billed Spoonbill, Red Wattlebird, Little Grass-bird, Baillons Crake, Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike, Grey Shrike-thrush, Superb Blue Fairy-wren, Straw-necked Ibis, Little Corella (never more than two or three, this pair seems to have bred at Bells Swamp for many years), Long-billed Corella, White-bellied Sea-eagle, Hoary-headed Grebe, Little Eagle (it's arrival certainly stirred things up!), Australian Shelduck, Nankeen Night Heron, Tree Martin, Grey Teal.

**The SEANA march camp**

will be held at **Camperdown**

**16 – 19 March 2012**

Hosted by the Timboon Field Naturalists Club

You will need to arrange your own accommodation

Booking fee of \$90 pp includes dinner Saturday and Sunday nights  
at Camperdown Golf Club

Please return a registration form and payment by 28<sup>th</sup> February  
to TFNC SEANA camp 670 Cobden-Terang Road, Cobrico 3266

## Lake Goldsmith, SW Victoria

Denis Hurley

Returning from Warrnambool on 15<sup>th</sup> January last, Christine and I stopped beside Lake Goldsmith, 14km south of Beaufort (Vic). We could not believe our eyes. The shallow swamp - lake was covered with wading and swimming birdlife. What was intended as a short stop went on for quite some time as we photographed Stilts close to the shore and admired a flotilla of black swans gliding in single file out in the middle of the water. A hide, a long lens camera and a whole day there would make this a birdo's paradise.

Two kilometres further on towards Beaufort, a smaller lake harboured a range of waders enjoying brushy overstory in the shallow water. Crakes, Yellow-billed Spoonbills, Red-kneed Dotterels (not much red knee, seemed to be covered in mud!), Banded and Black-winged Stilts were quite happy to continue feeding as we photographed.

We noticed that the birds in the larger lake were very nervous, staying well clear of the shore, suggesting experience of human interventions not in keeping with a bird sanctuary.

Birds seen in both lakes included: Gull-Billed Tern (*Sterna nilotica*), Red-Kneed Dotterel (*Erythrogonyx cinctus*), Black-Winged Stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*), Spotted (Australian) Crake (*Perzana fluminea*), Banded Stilt (*Cladorhynchus leucocephalus*), Black Swan (*Cygnus atratus*) and Yellow-Billed Spoonbill (*Platalea flavipos*).

And yes, you guessed it, no field glasses either, to pick up the myriad of other birds further out on the lakes. We can recommend a visit to that area, especially if you are better equipped than we were.







Photos by Denis Hurley

## Observations

- ◆ Chris Morris recently saw both a Wedge tailed Eagle and a Square-tailed Kite over Wesley Hill
- ◆ January observations – Yellow Thornbills have joined the Yellow-rumped Thornbills in regular visits to my backyard. On the Goldfields Track near Forest Creek, watched a Golden Whistler (female) feed a young chick. And local sightings recently of Black Cockatoos in small groups – Noel Young
- ◆ There is a regular forest of Red Gum seedlings out at Bells swamp, in one paddock and on the roadside, but it stops about 10cm outside the fence of the paddock where the sheep are. So it looks like sheep are just as fond of eucalypt seedlings as rabbits are. I also spotted a juvenile Black-fronted Dotterel there, but generally there were far fewer birds, and they were much more nervous, on our last visit – Rita Mills
- ◆ From 'Birdline' reports in January – Diamond Dove at Muckleford station (18/1 Greg McKay); Square-tailed Kite (18/1 Barkers Ck. Charles Silveira and 20/1 Campbells Ck. Geoff Park)

### **A Call for committee members (a cry of Help!?)**

At the January business meeting we had no indication of interest from members to fill committee positions. With the retirement of our President at this AGM we will be down to half a dozen active members, and half of these have been on the committee for many years. With a membership of around 70 we should be able to do better!

Please give consideration to volunteering some time if you are able, at the current AGM.

- [Ed]

## **In my backyard**

Denis Hurley

It may be the Year of the Dragon in Chinese lore, but I feel it is the Year of the Avian at Merrifield Street, Castlemaine. After years of watching small bird numbers decline drastically during the drought, my days this summer have been sorely disrupted by the frequent visits of many winged friends.

A pair of Brown Quail suddenly appeared a few weeks ago, and have taken up residence amongst the grasses, ferns and eremophilas - circling, scratching, eating and creating pasta-bowl sized hollows all over my yard. These divots might be good for catching the rain but I suspect they act also as location beacons for ravens and currawongs looking for a meal.

This male and female pair were at first very chummy, working in harmony with slow, forward head movements (three times), then one step forward (repeated several times), followed by a vertical jump (a 200 mm flutter off the ground) before returning to feeding. But over this last week, only the male has been appearing, staying most of the day within a metre of what I think is a nest site. All of this is taking place just beyond my rotary clothes line, and on occasion I have almost stepped on one of them when I come out of my back door.

The bird influx this year has been greater than the critter influx of the previous two seasons. Some January visitors have been:

### ***Fellas that make the quail nervous:***

Grey Currawong, Australian Raven, Laughing Kookaburra, Mapgie, White-Winged Chough, Red-lobed Wattle Birds (the latter now much fewer in number than before Nov 2011)

### ***Fellas that the quail don't mind:***

Grey Shrike Thrush, Crimson Rosella, Eastern Rosella, White-throated Tree Creeper, White-naped Honeyeater, Brown-headed Honeyeater, Yellow-faced Honeyeater, Rufous Whistler, Leaden Flycatcher, Superb Fairy-Wren, Striated Thornbill, Striated and Spotted Pardalotes, Speckled Warbler, New Holland Honeyeater..... Not a bad list for a back yard only 3km from the PO.

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### **CFNC Speaker List for 2012 (subject to some confirmations)**

February:	Jason Edwards
March:	Miles Geldard (nest boxes)
April:	Carol Hall (Greenland)
May:	Stuart Dashper (Birds)
June:	David Millsom (revegetation)
July:	Geoff Park (Moolort wetlands)
August:	Ern Perkins
September	Cassia Read (Lichens)
October:	Bob Cook (birds)
November:	Jeff Yugovic (botany)

<b>Disclaimer:</b> The opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the contributors and not necessarily those of the club
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# Castlemaine Field Naturalists Programme

## February 2012

**Fri February 10 meeting: AGM** : Election of office bearers  
speaker: JASON EDWARDS, wildlife photographer  
subject: "Death of a River Town"

**Sat February 11 field trip:** Wombat Dam, Daylesford \*  
\*leaves **9 am** from Duke St. - bring morning tea / lunch

**Fri March 9 meeting:** speaker: MILES GELDARD

### VISITORS ARE WELCOME AT CLUB ACTIVITIES

**General meetings** - (second Friday of each month, except January) are held in the Uniting Church (UCA) Hall (enter from Lyttleton St.) at 7.30 pm.

**Field Trips** - (Saturday following the general meeting) leave from the car park opposite Castle Motel, Duke Street at 1.30pm sharp unless stated otherwise. BYO morning and/or afternoon tea. Outdoor excursions are likely to be cancelled in extreme weather conditions. There are NO excursions on total fire ban days.

**Business meetings** - fourth Thursday of each month, except December, at Denis Hurley's; 20 Merrifield St., at 7.30 pm. All members are invited to attend.

### Subscriptions (2011)

Ordinary membership: Single \$27, Family \$35

Pensioner or student: Single \$24, Family \$29

Subscription includes postage of the monthly newsletter, Castlemaine Naturalist

### 2011 Committee

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